

Does teaching English contribute to greater cross-cultural understanding on the part of learners in Japan?¹

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Abstract: In this paper an attempt is made to answer the question of whether teaching English contributes to greater cross-cultural understanding on the part of learners in Japan. It starts with questioning and exploring the mindsets of those involved in English language teaching and learning, i.e., Japanese learners of English, Japanese teachers of English, native speakers of English, and native speaker researchers. It then argues that those mindsets have been interfering with the facilitation of cross-cultural understanding on the part of Japanese learners of English through teaching English as a foreign language. Finally, it concludes with a proposal that those involved in teaching and learning English should not conceive native speaker competence as their goal.

Keywords: English language teaching, cross-cultural understanding, mindsets, native speakers of English, non-native speakers of English, native speaker competence

Introduction

The Ministry of Education's (1989) guidelines for teaching English at secondary schools specify the facilitation of cross-cultural understanding as one of the objectives of English language teaching at school in Japan. However, they do not specify how the facilitation of cross-cultural understanding can be achieved through teaching English. Many Japanese teachers of English seem to tacitly assume that teaching English automatically results in greater cross-cultural understanding on the part of learners, but it seems not to be

the case.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to investigate why it has not been the case by questioning and exploring the mindsets, or beliefs and perceptions, of those involved in teaching and learning English in Japan, i.e., Japanese learners of English, Japanese teachers of English, native speakers of English (NSs), and NS researchers working in the areas of second language acquisition and second language pedagogy. The mindsets concern communication in English between NSs and non-native speakers of English (NNSs). They also concern English language teaching in

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general and the role of English language teaching in facilitating cross-cultural understanding on the part of learners in particular. It seems that these have been interfering with the teachers' attempts to facilitate cross-cultural understanding among their learners and therefore that English language teaching cannot play a positive role in facilitating cross-cultural understanding unless attempts are made to redress the mindsets.

Mindset of Japanese learners of English

One of the beliefs in the mindset of Japanese learners of English is that they often take it for granted that they should use English when they communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. Some of the learners cannot even imagine that their interlocutor would be willing to use Japanese as a means of communication. If their interlocutor utters a word or two in Japanese, they are likely to be very surprised and say, 'You speak Japanese very well.'

The learners seem to be preoccupied with the idea that the Japanese language and culture are very difficult for people from abroad to understand and learn. They tend to feel ashamed if they cannot communicate very well or make mistakes, either phonological or syntactical. They have a strong tendency to blame themselves both when they cannot

understand what they hear as listeners and when their interlocutors fail to understand what they are getting at as speakers.

But this is very strange, because communication is a collaborative endeavor, in which both parties involved should make every effort to get meaning across or negotiate meaning to reach a mutual understanding and therefore both parties are to blame if communication breaks down. It would be unfair if the responsibility for communication breakdowns were solely placed on the learner as a NNS. It is also important that Japanese learners of English realize that in Japan it is the Japanese language that should be considered as the primary or normal means of communication between Japanese people and people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. We often witness situations where Japanese people approach and address in English people from abroad without considering where they are from and what language they usually use in their own countries.

Japanese learners of English tend to respect, or at least like or long for, English-speaking people and cultures, while they tend to neglect, or at least think little of, other people and other cultures. This is a reflection of the Japanese learners' sense of inferiority toward people from English-speaking cultures and their sense of superiority toward people from non-English speaking cultures, especially people from Asian

countries including Singapore and the Philippines, where English is used as a means of communication. This inclination or tendency might have been aggravated since the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program started bringing a lot of NSs into the classrooms in Japan in 1987. NSs have definitely satisfied Japanese learners' curiosity, but when it comes to the content and the level of cross-cultural understanding, they seem to have had some negative effects.

Mindset of Japanese teachers of English

What about Japanese teachers of English? Unfortunately, many Japanese teachers of English also have a mindset that seems to interfere with the facilitation of cross-cultural understanding among their learners. Many of them are naive enough to equate the ability to speak English and the ability to understand different cultures.

They seem to be satisfied with team-taught lessons where assistant language teachers (ALTs) talk about their countries and cultures. In many cases, the scope and the object of cross-cultural understanding has been confined to the English-speaking cultures where the ALTs come from. By doing so, the teachers and the ALTs might have given the learners the impression that the cultures in the notion of cross-cultural understanding in English

language teaching only refer to the English-speaking cultures. More importantly, cross-cultural understanding in English language teaching has been confined to the knowledge or cognitive level. Cross-cultural understanding may well begin with the acquisition of the knowledge of a given culture but should not end there: knowledge of the culture itself could lead to prejudice against that culture. The essence of cross-cultural understanding lies in the acceptance of different values.

One important aspect of teaching English for cross-cultural understanding in Japan has been to help learners notice some elements of a different culture, or a different way of thinking, in the English language itself. For example, learners have been encouraged to notice the differences in how the two languages lexicalize ideas or how they realize ideas linguistically: languages differ in the way they have words or lexical items to express certain ideas. But cross-cultural understanding, or acceptance of different values, should be achieved through communicating, face-to-face, in English with people from various cultural backgrounds, but not through learning the language itself.

The teachers have also given the learners the wrong expectation that they would be able to learn to speak English like a NS with a reasonable amount of effort within a limited period of time. One of the risks of English language teaching relates to the potentially

false expectation of high achievement it offers to learners. However, it is evident that the NS competence or even competence close to NS competence cannot be achieved by most of the learners. To put it more accurately, NS competence or the ability to speak English like a NS should not be the goal teachers set for their learners. For example, pronunciation training has traditionally been conducted so that learners can produce the English sounds and intonation patterns in the same way as NSs do. But is it necessary for Japanese learners of English as a foreign language to learn to speak English like NSs?

At this point it may be instructive to introduce a distinction between English as a second language and English as a foreign language. When learning English as a second language in a country where it is spoken and used as a means of communication, learners may well be motivated to try to make their speech similar to that of their interlocutor or addressee in order to emphasize social cohesiveness. In other words, learners are motivated to converge on NS norms, i.e., speak like NSs. On the other hand, when learning English as a foreign language in a country where it is not spoken or not used as a means of communication, learners do not have to try to conform to NS norms, because they need not feel under pressure to be accepted as members of the target language community. They can

safely try to maintain their own social identity. However, when teaching English, teachers of English do not always consider such a distinction or teach English accordingly.

Many Japanese teachers of English tend to think that they cannot surpass their NS counterparts owing to their proficiency in English. This is based on the observation I have made of some team-taught lessons where Japanese teachers of English appear to have left every decision to make to their NS colleagues.

But the NNS status of Japanese teachers of English or their relative deficiency in English language competence should be perceived to be a positive attribute, not a negative one, because it is precisely this relative deficit that enables them to compete with NSs, particularly in a monolingual context such as Japan. What is a weakness on one side of the coin is an asset on the other, for the following reasons (Medgyes 1992: 346-347):

- a. Only non-NESTs (non-native-speaking EFL teachers) can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English.
- b. Non-NESTs can teach learning strategies more effectively.
- c. Non-NESTs can provide learners with more information about the English language.
- d. Non-NESTs are more able to anticipate language difficulties.
- e. Non-NESTs can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners.

f. Only non-NESTs can benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongue.

It is true that one of the most important professional duties NNS teachers have to perform is to improve their command of English. But they have to take pride in themselves as professionals who have had teacher training at university. A teacher's effectiveness does not hinge upon whether he or she is a NS or a NNS. Both NS and NNS teachers serve equally useful purposes in their own terms, complementing each other in their strengths and weaknesses.

Potential problems of teaching English

These seem to indicate that teachers should be aware of potential problems or negative effects of their teaching English. There seem to be at least three problems or negative effects.

One problem is that teachers have been contributing to the dominance, preponderance, or, as Phillipson (1992) puts it, linguistic imperialism of the English language in the world by teaching English. The English language has been dominant in economic life, science, and technology. Teachers have been contributing to the inequality between English and other languages and therefore to the inequality between NSs and NNSs.

Another problem is that teachers have been

reinforcing the learners' natural inclination to long for English-speaking people and cultures and have been playing a central role in the development and maintenance of racism, ethnic bias against NNSs and NNS cultures. They have been aggravating the learners' prejudice for NSs and against NNSs.

Yet another problem is that English is responsible for distorting education both at the junior and senior high school level, where, because of the time spent learning English, many learners often cannot and do not spend enough time studying other subjects.

Mindset of NSs and NS researchers

Some NSs seem to take advantage of the mindset of Japanese learners of English and they seem to take it for granted that NNSs use English when communicating with them. This situation is understandable to some extent when we consider the dominant status of the English language as an international language, but it is not a fair situation or an ideal one.

Some NS researchers working in the area of cross-cultural communication or cross-cultural pragmatics seem to have yet another mindset that conceives of learners of English as deficient communicators struggling to overcome an underdeveloped competence, striving to reach the target competence of a NS. This is a 'mindset that elevates an idealized

“native” speaker above a stereotypicalized “non-native” speaker, while viewing the latter as a defective communicator, limited by an underdeveloped communicative competence’ (Firth and Wagner 1997: 285).

They compare NNS verbal behaviors with those of NS. They focus on NNS deviations or aberrations from NS norms. Beebe et al. (1990), for example, observed that, in refusing invitations, Japanese learners of English tend to use excuses that seem to be less specific than the excuses Americans would typically use. They gave the following examples. When refusing the boss’s invitation to a Sunday party at his or her home, one Japanese responded, ‘My children have many problems.’ Another said, ‘I have a previous engagement.’ Still another said, ‘I have things to take care of at home.’ Thus the tendency to leave the excuse somewhat vague and nonspecific as to place or time, seemed to reflect transfer of a Japanese sociocultural norm. Americans would object, they argued, to the last excuse in that everyone always has things to take care of at home.

Another example is, in refusing offers, Americans tended to say ‘No, thank you’ or ‘I know it was an accident,’ but the Japanese subjects favored longer responses using reasons or even statements of principle and philosophy. For example, in refusing the woman’s offer to pay for the vase she broke by mistake, one Japanese subject said, ‘Things with shapes

eventually break.’ Another Japanese told the woman, ‘To err is human.’ Their responses sounded too philosophical and formal to NS researchers. In the analyses of these examples, the researchers compared verbal behaviors of Japanese learners of English with those of NSs. They were negative about any aberrations from NS verbal norms.

It has also been pointed out that Japanese learners of English tend to use expressions which are easily misunderstood (Hasegawa 1998). For instance, when running, on their way out, into someone in their neighborhood, many Japanese would say, ‘Where are you going?’ NSs may be offended at someone like this who treads on their privacy so abruptly.

Another example is that if NSs get to know a Japanese person, they may be asked to ‘go over to his or her place sometime’. They would probably be excited about being invited to the Japanese person’s house and be looking forward to that day. No matter how long they may wait, a formal invitation never comes. If they visit the person’s house without a formal invitation, saying that they were just in the neighborhood, they would send the person into confusion. That person would never have expected them to come over.

NSs should be aware that both ‘Where are you going?’ and ‘Come over to my place sometime’ are just forms of greeting. They are the translation equivalents of commonly used

Japanese expressions. They are not used to obtain substantial information from the interlocutors.

In addition, Japanese speakers of English have been criticized for not saying the truth. They have been criticized for not expressing their emotions candidly. On the contrary, it is almost as if they express the opposite motion most of the time.

Here is an example. When asked by a woman wearing some clothes which do not suit her, 'How do I look?' a Japanese person is certain to say something like 'It's so nice' even if he or she really believes the outfit does not look good on her, because it is Japanese manners not to say the truth if it might hurt the other person. Are their behaviors unacceptable?

Here again the responsibility for misunderstanding on the NS's part is placed on the Japanese learner of English as a NNS, not on the NS. It seems to me that NSs should try to understand how Japanese learners of English behave verbally and try to understand their way of thinking. Many NS researchers seem to believe that the goal of second language learning is the ability to speak like a NS. I do not think Japanese learners of English have to comply with English behavioral norms when they speak in English.

I have noticed some NS behaviors which do not conform to Japanese behavioral norms. For example, NSs seldom express gratitude when

they meet a Japanese person for the first time since they received some favor from him or her. Many Japanese people understand and accept those behaviors which deviate from Japanese norms. Therefore, it is necessary for NSs to understand and accept NNS behaviors which deviate from their norms.

Questions to be asked

The mindsets of both NSs and NNSs examined above seem to have been handed down from generation to generation in their respective societies and have been reinforced by pedagogical intervention. The examination of the mindsets has identified the following questions we have to ask and explore if we are to promote cross-cultural understanding through teaching English.

1) What is the role of NSs in NS-NNS discourse?

The first question concerns the role of NSs in NS-NNS discourse. NSs should respect or thank NNSs for using their first language as a means of communication and tolerate the deviations in their behaviors from English linguistic and cultural norms. It is important for NSs to try to understand how NNSs think and how they express their ideas.

NSs should try to make every possible effort to make the communication go smoothly for

NNSs by modifying input they give to NNSs and modifying interaction they involve NNSs in (Ellis 1997: 44-47). Input modifications include a slower delivery of speech, simplifications such as the use of shorter sentences, avoidance of subordinate clauses, and the omission of complex grammatical forms, avoidance of colloquial and slang expressions, and the use of regular or basic forms. Interactional modifications include comprehension checks, confirmation checks and clarification requests.

NNS learners, on the other hand, should be taught that NSs and NNSs have different but equal roles to play in communication. It is not fair if NSs play a dominant role and NNSs play a subservient role in communication owing to the difference in their linguistic status. Learners should be encouraged to play an active role in communication with NSs.

2) What is the role of teaching English in facilitating cross-cultural understanding?

The second question concerns the role of English language teaching in facilitating cross-cultural understanding in Japanese society.

I have already pointed out that the ability to use English cannot be equated with the ability to understand and accept different cultures or different cultural values. The ability to use English has nothing to do with the level of

cross-cultural understanding. This is evident in the fact that some English teachers who are very proficient in English are not understanding enough. They often exhibit total lack of tolerance for learners wanting to be different from their classmates. At many schools, strict rules are imposed upon learners' hair styles and clothes to wear. At school, which reflects the societal values, learners have been trained not to be different from their mates.

In such a society, teaching English for cross-cultural understanding is very important, because the essence of cross-cultural understanding is the awareness that there exist people who have different values ways of thinking and the awareness that people are different but equally important. Being different is a good thing, not something to be frowned upon. In Japanese society, which values being the same highly and frowns upon being different, learners seem to have been suffocated with uniformity.

3) Should NNSs conform to NS linguistic and cultural norms?

The third question is whether Japanese learners of English should conform to English linguistic and cultural norms, or whether they have to aim at being able to speak like a NS or behave like a NS at least linguistically. Here we have to take into consideration the above-

mentioned distinction between English as a foreign language and English as a second language. In the Japanese context, where English is learned and used as a foreign language, it seems to me to be perfectly all right for learners to develop a Japanese variety of English, in which some simplifications are made to phonology, for example. Japanese learners do not have to worry whether they can distinguish between l's and r's, as long as everyone else understands that Japanese speakers of English do not always distinguish between the two sounds. As Goldstein (1987: 432) argues, 'teachers of English...need to understand that standard English may not be the target for all their students.'

It is of course true that an understanding can be reached relatively easily in communication if the interlocutors involved share the same or similar linguistic and cultural norms. But this does not necessarily mean that learners always have to follow or comply with the NS behavioral patterns.

For example, when Japanese learners of English introduce themselves, they do not have to adapt their names to the English order (with the given name first). I am not comfortable when my name is inverted. A name is an integral part of a person's identity.

By the same token, it seems to me to be perfectly all right for Japanese learners of English to follow their own style of

communication when they speak in English. They do not have to conform to the communication style of NSs. It would certainly a fallacy to impose the communication style favored by a particular community or group as a universal norm against which diversity is seen as a deficit.

I think it is also perfectly all right for Japanese learners to bow while greeting someone in English instead of looking him or her in the eye and shake hands. It is all right for Japanese speakers of English to say, 'There's nothing to eat, but please help yourself.'

Teaching English is not teaching learners to learn to have a different identity but to learn to use English as a means of communication while maintaining their own identity. Auerbach and Burgess (1985) argue that English linguistic imperialism has manifested itself in the form of the hidden curriculum which attempts to inculcate Western cultural values in the guise of language teaching.

Although a number of researchers (e.g. Gardner and Lambert 1972) have suggested that when learners are motivated to integrate with the target language speakers and culture and to converge on NS norms, i.e., speak like a NS, high level of proficiency ensues, it is not preferable for learners of English as a foreign language to want to integrate or identify with NSs.

Therefore, to speak English like a NS or to

achieve NS competence should not be the goal of English language teaching and learning so that learners can be proud of their way of using English as a means of communication.

This reminds me of a classmate from India on the master's program I enrolled in at Lancaster University back in 1983. She was very confident of her English and would not change the pronunciation or expressions she used when I asked for clarification. In the same situation, most Japanese learners of English, due to lack of confidence in themselves, would have thought that they had made a mistake in pronunciation, syntax, choice of words or something and have tried to express the same idea differently. For all their efforts, NNSs can never achieve, and do not have to aspire to achieve, NS competence.

4) Is English inextricably bound to the culture of English-speaking countries?

This issue will take us to the last question of the relationship between language and culture, that is, is English culture-bound or could it be culture-free?

It is generally true that language and culture are so inextricably connected that they cannot be separated. However, English has been used so widely and by so many people as a convenient means of communication that it has lost connection with English-speaking cultures

to some extent. English has become and should become a culture-neutral language. As Alptekin (1993: 140) argues, 'rather than indulging in an over-simplification such as the inseparability of language and culture, it would be more realistic to speak of one language which is not always inextricably tied to one particular culture, as is the case with English.' It is possible to become bilingual without becoming bicultural.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt was made to question and explore some mindsets of those involved in English language teaching and learning in Japan. The mindsets seem to have been interfering with the teachers' attempt to promote cross-cultural understanding among their learners through teaching English. This situation might be improved if both teachers and learners do not perceive NS competence as the goal for English language teaching in Japan.

Note

1 This paper is based on the lecture I gave at the 1998 Okayama ALT Mid-year Seminar cosponsored by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, Okayama Prefectural Board of Education, and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) on November 25, 1998.

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